

MADLINE TRISTRAM

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A GIRL was sitting in the room when Maverley entered—the delightful white room, with long windows opening on the golden greens of a hot summer afternoon; it was like the cool, pearly interior of a sea-shell, lapped round with translucent depths of water; and the tall girl sitting there, in her flowing dress of black and white, carried on a pretty water-sprite simile. Maverley, after his tedious, sweltering journey down from London, was in the happiest mood of relaxation.

The young lady, a fellow-guest evidently, rose, her book in her hand, and stood for a moment facing him, as though in doubt of a vicariously hospitable duty. Maverley, returning her look with one of genial anticipation, felt, however, that his mood was incongruous; something seemed to have snapped it right across; water-sprite similes left his mind. On the contrary, in this day of radiance and gaiety, the presence before him, now that he met its eyes, suddenly suggested a wraith crossing the radiance with a warning from an alien world.

It was ridiculous to feel an involuntary chill, to look at a young lady who was beautiful enough for any simile and feel afraid of her. Maverley was unaware of having nerves, and justifiably confident of being difficult to frighten.

She had smooth black hair, a narrow white face, and eyes oddly pale and oddly radiant. And now, after this confronting moment that seemed long, she turned away, and stepping from the window, disappeared into the dazzling day outside. Maverley almost laughed at himself; he needed the reassurance of a laugh, for he had certainly and absurdly felt a pang of terror.

His hostess saved him from an analysis of this trick of the nerves, coming in from her drive, eager to greet him. Mrs. Graham and Maverley were contemporaries, although the man, after his life in India, looked more than his forty years, and Mrs. Graham, among many other people, had thought that Maverley for long had bravely smiled under the disappointment of her choice of Graham rather than of himself. But Maverley was aware of no bravery in the smile, and any disappointment was a hazy memory that carried him back to unfamiliarly callow epochs. He was fond of this affectionate comrade, and fond of her husband, and felt a kindly solicitude in the welfare of the young Grahams.

Constance, as he told her, had hardly changed during the five years that had passed since their last meeting: the good blue eyes, the distinguished nose and chin, the rosy, active plumpness. A nose like Mrs. Graham's could carry off any amount of plumpness; and hers was as yet by no means unwieldy. The day was restored to its normal significance as he looked at her, as he sat talking to her while she gave him tea, telling her lazily of his own doings—his life in India as a prominent government official had large responsibilities—and vividly interested in her fresh points of view about the English life that these five years had dimmed for him.

"And now you will stay for a month at least, won't you?" she said. "Ted counts on it, and you can always fall back on him if people bore you: a good many will be coming and going."

Maverley had finished his tea and was leaning back in his deep chintz chair, his hands clasped behind his head.

"You are thinner and browner, but nicer than ever," said Mrs. Graham. "I like the

pointed beard, Vivian; it makes you look diplomatic—an excellent impression for such impulsive warm-heartedness as yours to give; it must keep people off a little more."

"I like them on, you know. Of the people coming and going, Constance, who was the extraordinary young lady who was sitting here when I came in?"

The day was normal again, and mere curiosity was, normally, his only feeling.

Mrs. Graham's blue eyes attached themselves to his for a swift moment, and seemed to question him with a curiosity deeper than his own; but they returned placidly to her tea-pot as she replenished it from the kettle and asked: "Which young lady? There are four in the house, including my own Gladys, whom you remember."

"She was tall and slender, and black and white, with very large, wide-opened eyes."

"Oh—my niece. You remember poor Hugh died two years ago. This is his girl, Madeline Tristram. I've taken her to live with me. Her mother's people, who had her at first, did n't make her happy; they are of the merely fashionable type, and Madeline does n't care much about going out. She has been with me for a year. But why extraordinary?" Mrs. Graham added.

Maverley felt in the question an unconscious reproof of the absurd mood.

"Well, she is beautiful—extraordinarily beautiful."

"Yes, she is," said Mrs. Graham. And she went on after a slight pause: "She is a very clever girl, and, above all, a very good girl. She is always working at some dull drudgery for some dull committee. I almost resent her youth and beauty being dedicated to all the more thankless tasks of our modern highly organized charities; but she seems to like it."

"She is certainly wonderfully beautiful," Maverley repeated.

He did not see Miss Tristram again until dinner-time; and then, as she was the last to come in, he saw first the group in which Mrs. Graham had placed her,—three of the four girls: Gladys; and Mary Grey, who was ugly, intelligent, with prominent teeth; and Frances Goldworthy, who was pretty and very young, and engaged in a love-affair, not yet decisive, with young Collin Thornton. This group stood out in graceful freshness on a sober background

of married couples. Sir Archie Fleetwood, an amusing, languid youth; Collin Thornton himself; and a cheerful, callow boy, son of a neighboring squire, were the bachelors of the party. The lamps had not yet been brought, and the drawing-room was cool with the twilight coolness outside. The cries and laughter of the younger Graham children came from the dewy lawns. Miss Goldworthy laughed on a sofa with her suitor, and talk flowed happily when Madeline Tristram entered. The girl, again in white, but an unrelieved white hardly distinguishable in the dusk from her arms and neck, gave Maverley the strangest impression of solitude as she walked down the long room, smiling calmly and steadily, but not as though she smiled at anybody. She was, indeed, extraordinarily beautiful, and that perhaps explained the sudden hush that greeted her. People naturally turned to look, and, naturally no doubt, stopped talking for a moment.

"Vivian, you have n't formally met my niece," Mrs. Graham said, detaining Madeline by the hand as the girl was passing her, on her way, apparently, to a solitary chair near the window.

"Not formally," said Maverley, smiling.

"This is an old friend of ours, Madeline," Mrs. Graham added, still holding the girl by her hand.

"I knew your father," said Maverley. The pale, shining eyes were on his, and, simple and unembarrassed in her silence, she still smiled; her delicate lips seemed set in that line of faint smiling. "I knew him in India; I've spent a lot of my life out there."

"Madeline was born in India," Mrs. Graham softly tapped the hand she held upon her chair-arm.

"That was before my day. It must have been while I was at Eton." He paternally recognized Miss Tristram's youth.

"Yes, Madeline is twenty-three," Mrs. Graham assented to his chronology; "but you can hardly compare Indian notes—she left it when she was only a few months old."

"Ah, yes," Maverley repeated. He remembered that Hugh Tristram's wife had died in India. Quietly as the girl looked from one to the other while they spoke of her, he felt, before her silence, a growing discomfort—to call it by a tepid name. He must master it, or, once more, his nerves might play him that ludicrous trick;

and it was to reassure himself as to their soundness that he smiled at her again as he again met her eyes. For a moment, above Mrs. Graham's genial head, they held his. Then Mrs. Graham unclasped her hand, and she moved away, going to the solitary seat from which they had detained her, where, contentedly it seemed, she bent her head to watch the children playing on the lawn.

Maverley was asking himself what was the matter with him. What had he felt in that mute moment of encounter? He would not answer the question. He and Constance chatted, speciously he knew, and neither spoke further of Madeline Tristram.

At the dinner-table, from his place beside Mrs. Parflew, the rector's wife, he could see Miss Tristram far down the table. It was the dull boy who sat beside her, and he seemed to talk easily enough to her, while she turned to him the unvarying assent of her smile. Maverley imagined, as he watched, that the youth must be very dull, very self-centered, to talk so easily. Mrs. Parflew noticed his wandering attention, and her eyes followed his. She dropped her voice a little to say, "That's an odd girl, don't you think?"

It was not his own imagination, then, his own unrecognizable nerves—he saw that in Mrs. Parflew's intelligent countenance; but he was sorry that it was not, distinctly sorry that Madeline Tristram stirred even this cheerful and obvious lady to surmise. He took refuge in the subterfuge of the afternoon. "She is extraordinarily beautiful."

"Yes, is n't she?" said Mrs. Parflew, good-humoredly willing to accept the evasion. She added, however: "She never talks; it's so odd."

"Never?" Maverley could not control the startled quality of his voice.

"Well, I *have* heard her speak. I mean that it's quite noticeable—her not speaking. She is a nice, good girl," Mrs. Parflew went on; "she is always helping us. She will do anything—all manner of dull things other people shirk; but it's always in her own odd way."

"In what way do you mean? This mystery interests me."

"Ah, that's it, you see; she is a mystery. One can hardly describe it. She never wants to be near people. She wants

to help them, apparently; but it must be indirectly—at a distance from them."

He did not like to question, but he had to allow himself, "Does n't she care for people?"

"Oh, I should say she did, perhaps," said Mrs. Parflew. "It's rather the other way round."

He was left to ponder this saying while Mrs. Parflew turned her talk on her right-hand neighbor.

For the three weeks that followed Maverley, quite uncomfortably, watched Miss Tristram, so absorbed in conjecture that he sometimes wondered, pulling himself up short, whether she must not guess that she was being watched. And he wondered if other people were watching, too; but though the others apparently assented to her avoidance of them,—perhaps furthered it by their own avoidance of her,—he could catch no signs of a brooding intentness such as his own. It seemed by tacit consent accepted that she was not one of themselves. On neither side, perhaps, was there conscious withdrawal. She was among them, but it was as if they were embarked on a speeding ship, all pennons, music, light, and dancing, and she was a white albatross flying in loneliness beside it. From decks where lanterns swung against the darkness Maverley seemed to himself to lean and gaze and gaze at the bird that followed in the desolate void of black waves and sky.

Miss Tristram apparently spent her mornings in the drudgery of charities to which her aunt had referred, for in the mornings she did not appear. After lunch she went into the woods with a book. After tea she rode alone. Maverley saw her depart once or twice, and found a reassurance in the sight. She made him less uncomfortable than usual when he beheld her cantering down the avenue in the flickering lights of late afternoon. She and her horse, graceful, supple, and strong, looked as if joy were with them. Was she so joyless that he, the mere onlooker, could feel the change in her when she rode away on her horse—away from people who grew silent when she came among them? He told himself more and more vehemently that he was growing morbid, and that if his thoughts continued so to brood on Madeline Tristram, he must frankly tell Constance of his folly, and frankly ask her if

there were any reason for it. Yet how define a folly so indefinite? He only knew that when he encountered that still presence, met those steady eyes, it was with a pang, a thrill—of what he could not tell.

It was on an afternoon, having seen Madeline Tristram ride away, that Maverley, sitting on the lawn near the three other girls, heard them talking of her.

"You have known her for a long time, have n't you?" Frances Goldworthy asked Gladys. Gladys was a blonde, bonny girl, slender and with her mother's nose and chin. She stooped to play with her Dandie Dinmont as she answered: "Yes. She has lived with us for a year. I never knew her very well before that. She and my uncle traveled a lot."

"Were they very devoted to each other?" asked Mary Grey, who was sewing.

"I suppose so," and Gladys turned the Dandie Dinmont on his back and rolled him from side to side.

"She's awfully clever, is n't she? Knows heaps of languages and reads everything?" Frances asked.

"Yes, she knows a frightful lot," Gladys assented cheerfully.

"You see more of her, I suppose, when there are n't other people here. You talk more with her, I suppose?" It was Mary Grey's more probing question.

Gladys still rolled her dog; her young face had flushed. "Yes, I suppose I do. Madeline never talks much to any one."

There was a slight pause, after which, yawning with rather obvious affectation, Frances remarked, "She does n't seem shy."

"Oh, no; she is n't shy," said Gladys. Still with her flush, but cheerfully, she got up, whistled to her dog, and with her long, boyish step strode off to the house. The two girls, until she had disappeared, were silent.

"Do you like her?" Frances then inquired. She had glanced at Maverley before asking; but they evidently were all on the lighted deck together, and if he heard, it was only of the albatross they talked; fellow-feeling was taken for granted.

"Who?"

"Madeline Tristram."

"It is n't that I dislike her," Mary said, her eyes on her work.

"Well, I do; I don't like indifferent, superior-personish people like that. If you

don't dislike her, what *do* you feel about her?"

Frances had been tilting in her chair and rocking it, her arms clasped behind her head; now she let it rest squarely, in an expectant pause.

"I can hardly describe it; it's so ridiculous," Mary said.

"Well, say it, all the same."

"I hardly like to."

"Oh, but you must," said Frances, becoming urgent.

"One's imagination is so absurd—one can't of course trust it," Mary murmured, her kindly voice perturbed.

"Well, don't trust it—but tell me what you imagine."

"It's what I can't help feeling," said Mary. "It's horrible; but when I see her I can't help feeling almost horror."

In the long silence that followed, Maverley did not turn his head. He guessed a silent gaze. He could barely hear Frances Goldworthy's "I wish you had n't said it."

"Why? You don't feel it, surely?"

"No; but I see what you mean. I'm afraid I shall feel it now."

Maverley got up and walked away. He felt that he must walk—walk in the sunlight and try to shake off this nightmare. For—yes, that was it; it was horror; but a horror deeper than any that a girl's imagination could frame; and with it, as he recognized it, was a passion of protesting pity.

He met Sir Archie Fleetwood as he walked.

"Hullo," said the younger man, "what's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Do I?" said Maverley, with a pale smile. "The sun's hot."

Sir Archie, as though he had found a suddenly propitious moment, put his arm through Maverley's and walked on with him into the terraced garden. There, in the afternoon's most mellow hour of sunlight, the flowers shone with color like translucent enamels. Stilly they glowed, in masses, streaks, delicate jewel-like sprinklings; and to Maverley the motionless splendor was gruesome.

"Speaking of ghosts, you know," said Sir Archie, "it's the most awful rot, but does n't Miss Tristram freeze the blood in your veins?"

"My dear Fleetwood!" Maverley ejac-

ulated, as punctually as if he had been wound up to say it.

"I'm positively ashamed of myself," Sir Archie assented ruefully; "but I can't stand it. She gets too much on my nerves. I'm going to bolt."

"You'll own that it's not Miss Tristram's fault if you do."

"I'll own that I'm raving mad, if you will; but, to say the least of it, she makes me too uncomfortable. Her eyes are so big," said Sir Archie; "and she never speaks."

"I have heard her speak."

"You don't feel it, then?"

Maverley at once, with even a fierce quickness, lied. "No, I don't."

"I'm cracked, evidently."

Sir Archie lighted a cigarette. "You don't mind humoring a lunatic and letting me tell you what an ass I am?"

"Talk on, my dear boy; it's an interesting case."

"You'll not speak of it, of course."

"Of course not."

"Well, just as an instance of what she does to me, I woke early this morning—at dawn; and when I got up and looked out of my window I saw Miss Tristram below here, in this garden,—I see it from my window,—gathering flowers—white flowers. It was hardly light, you know; nobody was stirring, and there she was. I assure you my hair stood on end."

"You need a tonic," Maverley suggested, with inane common sense, after a slight pause in which he had tried to quell the echoes of Sir Archie's narrative.

"Of course I do."

"What did she do then?"

"Left the garden and disappeared in the woods, carrying the flowers. Own it's uncanny."

"Perhaps it is—when one needs a tonic. She was probably picking flowers for the house."

"There's not a white flower in the house," cried Sir Archie. "I looked—on purpose. But it's not anything she does," he added; "it's she herself. It's her eyes and her not speaking. I deserve a kicking for it, but I actually hate that inoffensive girl—actually hate her. I'm going to bolt."

Dislike, horror, hatred—Maverley pondered the crescendo when Sir Archie left him in the garden. He alone, apparently, felt pity—that wild, heart-wringing pang

and thrill of pity. The evening was falling as he walked on into the woods. A foot-path led through them. He followed it. It brought him to the highroad. The rectory and its grounds lay not far up the road, and beyond them were the little church and the old churchyard. A sudden thought struck him. He walked on to the church. The evening was cool, serene; it seemed to still the folly in his brain; and something mild and beneficent passed like a breeze over his nightmare mood, as he stood before a grave on which were white flowers. The tall stone at its head was inscribed with the name of Hugh Tristram. Maverley uncovered his head. It was her father's grave. His eyes sought the date on the stone. To-day was the anniversary of his death. So much for Sir Archie. And yet he would have felt that fear had he seen her picking white flowers at dawn.

"Yes, I'll tell you about her—tell you all I know. It's a mistake—always, I think, a mistake—to blink things with one's friends."

Mrs. Graham and Maverley were sitting in the little morning-room sacred to her solitude. He had followed her there after breakfast, with a hint that she had understood.

"You see—it's making me haggard," he confessed, with a bleak laugh.

"Perhaps it would make me—if I were a little less tough; but I have a robust common sense," Mrs. Graham replied. She no longer pretended to hide a mutual knowledge of the something extraordinary in Madeline that was other than her beauty.

"I hoped that perhaps you would be different from other people," she owned, though adding: "You are different in one way: you mind so much more. The children, now, merely find her queer, though Gladys recognizes that other people find her more than that, and resents it for Madeline; with people in general it is only, as a rule, shrinking and dislike. For myself, I am used to her now; I simply don't mind. And I am terribly sorry."

"But what is it?" Maverley almost groaned.

"It is just what you see and feel: that she inspires dislike, and sometimes dread. She is like a ghost."

"Is there any reason for it?"

"It seems to be her whole personality. One never gets near her. One can't. Even I, with all my common sense, have to nerve myself to kiss her. But there *is* a reason—at least it's the only one I can think of—her mother, her life."

"What was her mother? What was her life?"

"Her mother was foolish, selfish, and beautiful. Before Madeline's birth she fell into a state of despairing terror. Poor Hugh, who adored her, told me about it all. She was convinced that she would die; she loved life, and she hated the child that was to rob her of it. No persuasion or reasoning could shake her, and it was apparently her mere terror that killed her; for she did die when Madeline was born. Madeline passed her life in wandering about the world with her father and governesses and masters. He did his duty by her unflinchingly, but he saw her as little as possible. Before he died he told me that Madeline, from the hour of her birth, was horrible to him."

"Good God!" broke from Maverley. He sprang to his feet, thrusting indignant hands into his pockets. "Is n't that reason enough! She has been blighted from birth—from before birth! She was born with a curse on her."

"Yes, she really was. Poor Madeline!"

"She knows?"

"She must know what her father felt. He told me that he used to try to force himself to tenderness when she was a child, and that she always shrank from him, as if she guessed his horror of her."

"Her mother's horror, her father's horror, are in her blood. That is why she seems horrible."

"Yes. It is all most unnatural, most perplexing," said Mrs. Graham, with a sigh, as if feeling the incongruity of her own connection with such morbidities.

"And what disgusts me with myself," she went on presently, "is that I never dare talk it out with her. After all, what could I say? 'My poor girl, why is it that people find you horrible?' My only hope is that she does n't know it."

"She seems to you happy, then?"

"She seems to me impassive and perfectly indifferent."

"Ah! But is she? Is she?" cried Maverley, striding to the end of the little room and back again.

"Well, that is the question; that is what I don't dare have out with her. If she is unconscious I might make her conscious, and that would be lamentable. But I can't think her really unhappy; a person so active can hardly be unhappy. She is always doing something. She never broods. If she were unhappy she would n't seem so uncanny. It's her not seeing, not caring, that is part of her dreadfulness—her not feeling any of it."

"Ah! But does n't she?" broke again from Maverley.

Mrs. Graham, tapping her fingers on the table, watched their rapid rhythm.

"My dear Vivian," she presently suggested, "since you care—so much, why don't you find out?"

He stopped before her now, taking in the significance of her downcast eyes. It was only after a long pause that he said, putting the fact before himself as well as before her: "I suppose because she frightens nobody as she does me."

Mrs. Graham could not tell whether it was confession or repudiation.

"Why don't you try to get over being frightened?" was her final comment.

MAVERLEY was trying to get over it as he walked in the woods that afternoon. Madeline's story had raised a passion of pity that could no longer hoodwink itself, and it called upon all his manliness, all his courage, to trust it as a deeper instinct than his dread.

The test to his trust was almost immediately presented to him in the sudden sight of Madeline. He had emerged from closely growing trees and bushes upon a little grassy clearing, a sunny knoll, flecked with dancing shadows from three tall beeches crowning it like a group of slender nymphs metamorphosed into three woodland forms while they danced.

The sky above was blue, the grass was long and thick, and lying in it, a book before her, her hat tilted over her eyes, was Madeline, a streak of sunlit whiteness in the green. She had not heard or seen him. Maverley, as he looked at her, felt the pause of contemplation to be beautiful, beneficent, as he had felt the moment to be when he had recognized the white flowers on the grave. For this was a different Madeline. She was not faintly smiling—the difference that he first felt; her eyes

were raised and gravely watched a bird that fluttered with a flash of gold from branch to branch in the woods. She did not smile; she was grave; but in the contemplative gravity he saw happiness, and knew now, and surely knew, that he had never before seen her happy. Presently the bird, like a winged flower tossed into the air, flew up—away—over the woods. Madeline's eyes followed it out of sight. Her long white hand, passing softly through the grass, seemed to love its supple warmth and smoothness; she sighed deeply, happily.

She was happy. She was part of the day, part of the sunlight, the grass, and the flying bird. In her tragic aspect she had frozen his heart; she melted it now; he could have wept for the pathos of her happiness. He still gazed—gazed at its revelation. He still stood at the edge of the wood, holding his breath, unable to think beyond the golden moment. But as if she felt that tears were near her, as if some echo of his forgotten fear came to her, or else from some deep sense of the contrast this lonely happiness made with her other loneliness,—the loneliness filled with alien faces,—Madeline dropped suddenly her head on her arms and wept and wept and wept.

Her grief was the final revelation that struck all memory of ghosts from him. He sprang to her, forgetting everything but her sorrow and his love for her.

"Madeline—Madeline!" he said, and bent over her. "Tell me what it is."

For a moment she lay there, her face hidden, her weeping hushed, as quiet as an animal surprised and feigning death. A quick seeing of his own words, to an almost unknown girl, as amazing—amazing perhaps to the point of insolence in her eyes—flashed over him; but the instinct that had made them inevitable did not leave him. Only as she slowly raised herself on an arm, her face bent downward, slowly rose to her feet, did the strong instinct begin to ebb from him. It had urged him almost to the infolding of her in his arms; but now he drew back from her.

Madeline raised her head and looked at him, and as she looked his love stormed in his heart, struggling and strangely mingling with a terror of her, greater and more appalling than any he had ever felt. She looked at him, and her eyes were full of a ghastly fear. He could not unfold this nightmare figure, but he could hold his

courage over the abyss where her eyes suspended it. "Tell me what is the matter with you. I will know—I will know!" he repeated sternly. When he spoke to her she retreated; she put out a hand to the nearest beech-tree and leaned against it.

"Why do you look at me like that?" In his effort to face her, Maverley's voice was fierce. "Answer me!" he demanded.

"I am afraid of you," said Madeline.

"Afraid of me?"

"You almost kill me with fear."

"Why? Why are you afraid?"

"I am afraid of everybody." She answered him as a ghost might have answered, in a voice monotonous and soft.

"Why are you afraid of everybody?"

"Because they hate to see me—they hate me. But you"—she shuddered—"you are worse than all the rest—worse than my father! I can't bear it!"

"We are both mad. It's a madness that your fear creates. You hypnotize everybody into a dread of you. It's absolutely a case of suggestion. Take hold of yourself; conquer it. The whole world will change to you if you will stop being afraid." Yet, as he spoke, his voice choked, for those eyes still looked—looked at him.

"I am not afraid when I am alone. Won't you leave me?"

What could love do when such terror met it, and when such terror was its home? It was like a flower rooted in a quicksand and shaken by a whirlwind. It lived, but it quaked from root to chalice; it lay upon the ground. Maverley turned from her. He went down the grassy knoll into the woods; and he, a man who had not wept for years, sobbed helplessly, angrily, his clenched hand at his forehead.

HE must go next day. He could not face the disintegration of his courage—a courage so ready in all the normal crises of life; he could not face the madness that his torn mind menaced, the agony of his own craven helplessness before her awful need.

That was Maverley's conclusive thought, as he lay trying to sleep, on the night of the day that had crashed revelation after revelation upon him: Madeline's happiness, her sorrow, his love for her, her hideous fear of him, and his own more hideous fear that had answered it. For how could help—and a help weighted by such fear—reach her? All that she asked of life was

to be left alone, and her martyrdom was the facing of a world of eyes that dared not show their shrinking. As he thought of her, her youth and loveliness stretched on such a rack, he groaned. How could he leave her? And like the swing of a pendulum came the opposing question, How could he be near her?

He fell suddenly asleep, thought and feeling snapped through their long tension.

He was awakened from heavy dreams, where dull bells rang and under a heavy sky he and a great host of others, their horses panting beneath them, hunted a white animal that sometimes ran and sometimes rose in the air, passing swiftly and smoothly through great open spaces, or, as smoothly, as swiftly, through the high branches of dark and lonely woods. As he rode his heart was torn by pity for the quarry and by horror of its whiteness, its swiftness, its soft uprising in the air.

A hand was on his shoulder, and as he struggled with his dream, striving to cry, "Madeline!" a voice said, "Wake! Wake!"

He opened his eyes, to a stranger dream, it almost seemed, but in its strangeness a relief, a rapture—a delicious rapture of relief. His room was filled with a dim, rosy light, and near him a figure muffled in white shook his shoulder and cried to him.

"The house is on fire!" said Madeline Tristram.

It was not the soft, monotonous ghost-voice, nor the voice of impassive courtesy that he had known; this voice, curt, decisive, seemed never to have known fear or an empty courtesy. "Hurry! The stairs are on fire. There is no other escape."

While he sprang up and dashed on his dressing-gown, she tore a blanket from the bed and drenched it with water from the jugs. He found her fastening, with swift, steady fingers, a wet handkerchief across his mouth and nose.

"And now the blanket," she commanded. "Over your head; well around you. I have mine." He caught her hand to his breast. "We must not hesitate. To run through is our only chance," she said. He threw open the door. A cavern of flame was below them; the stairs were obliterated.

"Too late—too late. The window!" she cried.

Maverley had caught her back as she stood for an instant transfixed. He closed the door upon the coming death.

"My God! you have killed yourself," he said. "You came up those stairs? Through that fire? Alone?"

"Yes—yes! The window!"

"The window is impossible. This turret room looks on a paved court; it is one of the highest in the house. I always have it; I liked the view."

He was not conscious of the bitter irony of this fatal liking, merely explaining the fatality; it paralyzed all action: but he crossed with her to the window, looking out, down at the sheer, impossible blackness. Over the dark woods and hills the sky arched, softly red. The little lake shone like a rosy jewel. A cloud of sparks trailed overhead, drifting slowly downward.

"My God! my God!" Maverley repeated, "you have killed yourself." Unconsciously he still held her close. "Why did you do it?"

From the blackness beneath, the sky overhead, he looked back at her, seeing her clearly now in the growing, ominous brightness. Her hair fell, a heavy curtain of black, about her illumined face, over her shoulders, over his hands that held her, —tragic, melancholy hair: but in the illumined face was more than tragedy. She had seen their doom. She had accepted it. Her eyes looked into his deeply, fearlessly, with a noble gravity.

"I came to save you if I could. I came to die near you if you had to die."

"Madeline," he said, "did you know that I loved you?"

"I did not know."

"You came because you loved me?"

"Yes, yes," she gently said, leaning her face upon his breast. Softly, almost in whispers, as though their words raced with a pursuer in the dark, they spoke, their faces hidden from each other.

"I have loved you from the moment that I understood—from before then, perhaps," Maverley was saying.

"And I loved you, and knew you found me horrible. In all my life I have never been so afraid as when I heard your voice this morning. Nobody has ever loved me. Everybody has shuddered at me ever since I was born; before I was born my mother shuddered at me."

"A curse was on you. You only needed to see that some one was not afraid."

"Yes, yes; I have longed for one kind face. I have fought, fought, determining

never to let it master me, hoping that if I showed nothing I should conquer my own fear and theirs. I was always sick with fear and longing."

"And I—cruel coward, like all the rest—shuddered! Ah, Madeline, let me look at you while I may. It was this—this heavenly face that I feared."

Her smile at him went like a bird under a sky of tempest.

"I am glad the fire did not touch it. How horrible to have only reached you charred and shriveled! Your last thought of me could only have been a shrinking."

Before the unendurable beauty of her courage it was he who had hid his face upon her breast.

"I should not have shrunk had you come blind and featureless, my darling. Madeline! Madeline! Such beauty—such wonder—such a heart—to die for me!"

"But such suffering to end with such unimagined happiness," she said, bending her head to his; "such loneliness to end like this. Is n't this enough? Is n't everything explained, atoned for?"

The man stammered on, while her hand, strong, tender, consolatory, held his head against her breast, his rebellion, his remorse, his adoration. The roaring circle of doom about them had narrowed life to an instant. Maverley knew it to be the last. He kissed her, looking into her eyes, even his rebellion forgotten in the deep and beautiful recognition.

Yet, "Oh, if I could have lived for you!" he heard his own voice. A shivering crash shook the room. Dense smoke filled it. He could not see her. The sky was blotted out. Stifling, he only knew that darkness was about them; that they clung together. And suddenly, in the struggle of death, hearing her gasping on his breast, a gust of air swept to them. The smoke lifted. Voices called outside, approaching. "Are you there? Are you there?" they called. The door, crumbled with fire, fell in at a blow. Maverley, holding the unconscious girl, staggered to the air, the light, the voices. The fire was out, checked on the very threshold, and hands helped him over ruins that ran with water, down ladders, in the chasms of the wrecked house. He would not let these hands take Madeline from him. He still held her when, in the hall, strange and unfamiliar with its wet and blackened walls, hurrying lights, weep-

ing, laughter, and blanched, uplifted faces, he knew that they were to live. A great shout had arisen, a babel of thanksgiving.

"Oh, Vivian! Vivian! You are together! She went into the flames—when you alone were missing. Is it possible—is it possible that she went through them alive?" Mrs. Graham, disheveled, tears on her cheeks, her lips trembling with half-hysterical smiles, clasped them both. "Darling—wonderful girl!"

"She found me—she found me!" He knelt beside Madeline in the chair they had placed for her, a deep chair; against the high back her face, wreathed in its black hair, seemed gently sleeping; her slender body seemed to sleep. Maverley now saw how charred was the blanket that half folded, half fell from her; saw that her naked feet were scorched. Such an anguish of fear smote upon his joy that with both hands he clutched the chair to keep himself from falling.

"Tell me—tell me that she is only fainting," he gasped.

Mrs. Graham's hand was at the girl's heart, her lips on her brow. "Only fainting, my dear Vivian; but burned—badly burned."

"She never winced—all the time," he panted. "She must have been in torture."

"At such a moment she perhaps could feel nothing."

"Perhaps she only felt what I felt—only knew that we had found each other," Maverley murmured.

He looked around. Mary Grey's, Frances Goldworthy's, faces were there, worshipping as if before a shrine. Sir Archie was there, crying, actually crying, and so funny in his exquisite pajamas, holding a reckless candle. Ted Graham, at a little distance, hid his face in his hands. Gladys knelt at her cousin's feet, a reverent hand on the charred, wet blanket.

The cruel phantom that had dogged her life was gone forever, exorcised by her act of splendid love.

"There—she is coming back—her eyelids lifted! She is alive—alive!" Constance Graham almost chanted.

Madeline opened her eyes. They had last looked at death. Now life, the murmur, the light, the touch of life, was about her. More than life. Love, everywhere love, smiled at her; and from a new world she looked up into her lover's eyes.